



Resilience Reimagined: Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom

SUMMARY

Mindfulness techniques help students and teachers focus inwardly on reducing stress, developing clear attention, and interacting more positively with others. This group of authors present a research-based discussion on the benefits of teaching deep breathing, intention setting, and yoga to build students' repertoires of mindfulness skills that support social and emotional development and physical well-being.

If resilience "... is the force that drives

a person to grow through adversity and disruption" (Richardson, 2002, p. 307) then mindfulness can be defined as its counterpart; the practice of harnessing our full attention through focused intention and practice. The force of resilience is not static and predetermined, but can be developed purposefully over time by incorporating simple mindfulness practices (Klau, 2013) that include deep breathing, intention setting, and yoga.

Our students confront adversity and disruption regularly in school. Teaching resilience is a basic component of social-emotional learning but it is rarely taught explicitly. Mindfulness practices can help students (and their teachers) learn to relax, to develop

focused attention, and to suffer from fewer distractions. Mindfulness is essentially "receptivity and full engagement with the present moment," (Black, 2011). Being mindful allows individuals to focus clearly on the reality of a situation.

Amanda Eilenfeld shares one of her experiences with mindfulness:

One afternoon, a student was feeling anxious about going home. She threw herself on the floor crying and yelling in the hallway. This student has limited communication and does not handle change well. It had been a long day, and I could feel my frustration creeping in as she refused to get up off the floor. Many thoughts went through my head and I could feel myself becoming overwhelmed. It was then that I felt the piece of yarn hanging from my bag

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— a reminder learned in a training that I had to stop, breathe, and think before I react. I stopped and suddenly saw the situation for what it was. This scared little kindergartner was sad and didn't understand why we were going home early that day and not to lunch like every other day. I got down on the floor with her, held her close and signed that we would eat lunch tomorrow and today she would eat lunch with mom. I sat there for a few seconds holding her and she just let out her frustration through tears. She calmed down, and we were able to walk to the bus hand in hand.

In his book, *Understanding the Stress Disease Connection*, Maté (2003) reviews the myriad ways in which chronic stress negatively impacts our physiology, leading to a host of often preventable diseases. Chronic stress also affects the way that we as teachers, and our students, cope and consequently meet the increasing demands of the classroom, home, and life after school.

Lantieri (2011) discusses the benefits of contemplative practices — or those practices that facilitate deep thought and reflection, including quieting the

mind through deep breathing and yoga — which includes the practice of intention setting. She suggests that developing resilience through

“... engagement in contemplative practice has positive effects on the health and well-being of teachers, that these effects may extend to their students through direct and indirect interventions and that this impact may be especially pronounced for students who are at risk of reacting to stress in ways that are destructive (p. 289).”

We take breathing for granted. We do it automatically because we breathe to stay alive. We are often not conscious of it. However, most of the time we practice shallow breathing. By learning to breathe deeply and consciously, we can boost the amount of oxygen we take in, increasing energy and decreasing our stress level. By making breathing a conscious strategy we can use it to calm ourselves or to calm our students in stressful situations both in and out of the classroom.

Controlled deep breathing is an exercise that involves careful attention to the breathing process. Essentially, it is making room for the diaphragm,

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located just beneath the lungs, to lower into the abdominal area, then taking in and releasing breath using the full capacity of the lungs. An image one can use to develop conscious breathing technique is as follows:

Sit up (or stand) with a straight back and a soft, relaxed front. Place one hand on the chest and the other hand on the belly. As you inhale, breathe deeply and feel the belly rise as it becomes filled with your breath. Then feel your belly fall as you exhale, expelling as much air as you can. Repeat this exercise 2-3 times to re-energize all of the cells in your body.

By practicing controlled deep breathing you are better prepared for times when the stress level is being heightened and you need to be able to calm yourself. By looking within ourselves and at our students we can reevaluate situations from a different perspective, by creating conditions that allow us to think. We know that when in a heightened state of stress, the body's natural fight or flight response is activated. Since children and teens are operating with a developing brain, they do not have the mature reasoning ability of an adult with a fully developed pre-frontal cortex, the thinking and reasoning part of the brain (Lau, JY et. al. 2011). Controlled deep breathing allows students to calm themselves so they have access to the thinking and reasoning

part of the brain, instead of reacting to fight or flight messages from the limbic system.

These days it is not uncommon for students to come to school feeling stressed for a variety of reasons. Some experience complex trauma resulting from poverty, disability, neglect or abuse. Among other difficulties, their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional response abilities are impaired. They tend to become easily frustrated and overwhelmed by seemingly small stressors (NCTSN, 2013). Resilience is essential to navigating the increasingly complex and stressful world we live in.

The Importance of Modeling

The Social Emotional Development and Learning Professional Learning Community (SEDL PLC) was created in our school to improve outcomes for students by fostering the social-emotional competencies of educators. The SEDL PLC members reported greater calm in their classrooms, reduced need for creating behavior intervention plans, more students on task and focused more of the time, and better quality student work.

In a training offered collaboratively through the Capital Region BOCES and the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center we learned about mindfulness practices. Cultivating

Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) is a program developed by the Garrison Institute supported by researchers at Penn State (Jennings, et al. 2009). The CARE program focuses uniquely on developing teachers' social and emotional skills. Through a capacity building process in which teachers receive "explicit instruction to promote social and emotional literacy" (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009 p. 504) supported by administration and coaches, educators become more aware of their own emotions, are better able to regulate them, are more responsive to student needs and become more personally and professionally resilient. As a result, in the classroom, teachers experience,

“. . . stress reduction, increased mindfulness, and improved relationships with colleagues, [that] have the potential to break the negative cycle whereby teacher and student actions play off of each other, leading to increased teacher stress, poor classroom climate, and continued student misbehavior (Lantieri, 2009, p. xiii).”

Before the training, we used to focus on building students' repertoires of skills without realizing how important it was for the teacher as role model, to embody and exemplify those skills for them. It is no secret that students learn from what we do as educators, more than what we might tell them to do. If

we embrace a mindset of continual social-emotional development for ourselves and use mindfulness practices that support our students as well, they will see that we truly value these practices and will have examples of how they can use them independently.

Some of the core competencies related to social-emotional learning include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. There is a growing body of evidence in the fields of social-emotional learning and brain research that suggests that fostering mindfulness practices for students and teachers has the potential to dramatically improve conditions for teaching and learning in the classroom, including increased motivation, focus, and achievement (Lantieri et al., 2011).

Practicing and modeling controlled deep breathing is one simple thing educators can do to be at their best for their students. The practice of deep breathing to regulate emotions may begin as a conscious one but over time it can become almost automatic. Once people develop a routine, they will find that they are using the controlled deep breathing technique without having to think about it when a situation arises.

Eilenfeld describes, “regular practice for me has become five minutes every morning after I arrive at school in the

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car, before I start my day. I close my eyes, breathe deep calming breaths and completely relax. I do not think about what I have to do, where I have to go, or the stress of the day that may come later. Thoughts may enter my mind, but I simply notice that I am thinking, let the thoughts go, and return to focusing on my breath. It's time just for me.

By being more mindful, developing my own social-emotional competencies, I can “be present” for my students. I focus completely on them and what is happening in the moment. I model authentic practice because my students see me using breathing as a tool, both deliberately and in context. This is vital for my students who need to be able to draw on their social and emotional skills to navigate real world situations in the classroom and throughout their lives.”

An Elementary Perspective

In a classroom with 5- and 6-year-old children, there tends to be a lot of energy in the room and these students can be very excitable. When returning from recess or lunch we have to transition back into instructional time. We take a couple of deep breaths. My students are deaf, so it is natural for me to use the American Sign Language sign for calm to indicate that it is time to be

relax and become calm. This is an adaption I made based on my students' needs. I quiet my voice and repeat the calming sign as we breathe together several times until I see them starting to relax. Then, we can proceed to whatever is next.

Practicing deep breathing makes sense at other times as well. Sometimes teachers want students to be excited, but not all the time. Constant heightened energy exhausts both teacher and students. I notice anytime my students become overly excited to the point where we are no longer productive, my patience is tested. After we breathe together, the classroom dynamic changes. Students are able to engage and focus and they come up with better questions and produce higher quality work.

Breathing exercises become part of the daily routine and create an environment conducive to learning over time. At the beginning of the year, students are very impulsive; however, as the year progresses, the amount of time needed to help them achieve calm, is reduced. After only a few months of practicing breathing techniques, I am often able to just give the sign for calm and students calm themselves almost instantly.

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A Middle School Perspective

Middle school students respond to modeled mindfulness strategies as well. The impact of the controlled deep breathing, intention setting, and yoga techniques was obvious and huge. Students' agitation decreased as a result of implementing these mindfulness practices. Sometimes they would arrive in the morning already agitated. After learning these new strategies, many students reported feeling better and more relaxed. When triggered, they stopped, breathed, and were then able to process what was going on before reacting.

Upon returning from the CARE training provided through the SEDL PLC, we began controlled deep breathing with our students. A custom made sign that reads "BREATHE" in bright blue lettering hangs in our classroom. We would take time each day and breathe in and out deeply several times. The students responded positively, actively participating in the guided deep breathing exercises and many reported feeling "better" and "more relaxed" after completing the exercises.

In the classroom, intention setting is another strategy that can be used with students as a part of mindfulness practice. It can also help students choose how they would like to perceive and approach their experiences that day.

We begin by explaining and providing many examples of what an intention is and why and how they are used. Ultimately, intentions are more a way of being in the present moment, and how you choose to perceive your experiences, than goals of how you want to be in the future. Because we live in a future-focused culture, this can be a difficult concept for both adults and the students with whom they work. For this reason, we start with intentions that resemble short term goals and move gradually toward more present moment intentions as you might experience in a yoga class. For example, a goal-oriented intention might be to "become more patient" while a present-focused intention might be "patience," meaning you intend to view your experiences through a lens of patience. In both cases, better choices can result from the perspective developed through intention setting.

Initially, defining an intention with your students is analogous to Task Analysis 101. It is impossible to expect students to make good choices without showing them how to operationalize those choices. I first put the word on the board according to Merriam Webster: "An intention is any meaningful action." I then give a concrete example based on what I know about my students. For example, one

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boy does BMX bike tricks. He was missing some parts he needed to repair his bike. I asked him to share with the class. “In your mind you have an *intention* to put this beautiful bike together so you can ride it. Think about the steps you have to take to accomplish that. What do you have to do?” Students can usually come up with the steps easily. He knew he would have to behave for his mother, wait for his mother’s payday, make plans to get the parts at the bike shop, and put the parts on the bike. I then explained, “Here in our classroom you can set an intention for how you want your day to go. You have a choice. We are here to help you, but we can only help you as much as you want to help yourself. It has to be about what you want for yourself.”

Next, we discuss the word “specific” — “You knew specifically what you needed to be able to fix your bike. What are the specific steps you need to have a good day?” It is really interesting because they come to realize the answers are inside of them. Each student and educator in class has the opportunity to set an intention at this time. Intentions set vary by individual, but all develop the self-awareness and self-management social-emotional core competencies.

Some typical student intentions include “Positive day,” “Take a break when I need one,” “Remember to breathe,” “Patience.” With the personal sense of purpose facilitated by intention setting, and with the breathing and yoga, they have the tools to better manage their own behaviors.

When a student’s frustration is triggered, I ask, “Will this help you fulfill your intention?” and the reply is often “No, but...” I then say, “Well, you have a choice. What can you do instead?” And, they are able to calm themselves, think and make a better choice based on their intention. This is the key.

Helping students develop their awareness and control by giving them the tools that allow them to self-regulate, or manage their own behavior, is empowering. That is not to say it is easy. Non-traditional learners, who have challenges in traditional settings, now have the added intensity that new regulations pose. Emotionally and cognitively the increased intensity manifests in different ways every day. At times, we just need to stop and breathe. Staff will say, “Give me five.” Then, they model breathing right in front of students. When we take care of ourselves we are better poised to take care of our students.

The Yoga Studio

After the December break, in an adjoining room or *studio* beside the classroom, students began participating in a yoga practice *with staff* twice a week. The goal was to deepen their experience with controlled breathing and give them an additional tool for relaxation. When it is time for yoga, the students help to set up the room by clearing space and placing mats for our practice. To my amazement the students, who were all boys, loved it! I witnessed growth in their confidence, willingness to take risks and enhanced physical strength.

While doing yoga may seem awkward to some at first, an open mind is always encouraged. Through practicing yoga poses we are simply opening up our bodies and opening up our minds. It comes with practice just like breathing or anything you do in life.

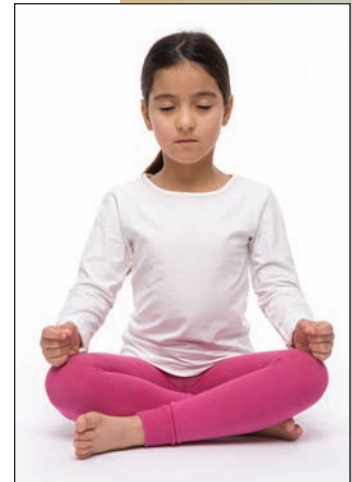
Students are also taught about etiquette for the yoga studio, which is likened to sports. They are asked to take off their socks and shoes, as is customary for yoga, just as wearing sneakers is customary when on the basketball court. Every practice is begun with sitting quietly and breathing. Students often experience their minds racing at first. They understand that this is okay, and are reminded to return to the breath and notice when their thoughts begin to slow down.

After that, we go through different traditional yoga poses and whenever possible, make connections to the science of human anatomy. On a big diagram we point out the targeted areas on the body and discuss how working with these can relieve stress. One example is sitting for long periods of time which can cause sciatica. We look at the sacrum on the chart. We then do traditional poses in a Vinyasa flow style. In Vinyasa, breathing is coordinated with the movement. Breath is taken in and then released as the pose is executed. Some poses we teach include sun salutations, forward bend, downward facing dog, plank pose, and the cobra pose.

Math connections can also be made in yoga. After practicing, we discuss angles and parallel lines. We count. When we are in class, whether it is writing a sentence, solving a problem or even getting ready to go home, I find I can ask my students to recall how we do the sequence in yoga, to help them remember that every process has steps.

One student with autism had a really hard time engaging in yoga last year. It's beautiful to see him now comfortably seated and automatically going into the breathing pose. This was a young man who would not take his sneakers off. Now he is setting up the mats and asking with disappointment

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on non-yoga days, “It’s not a yoga day?” These little diamond moments make it all worthwhile.

Implications for educators

In the article “Pedagogical Recycling: How Colleagues Change Colleagues’ Minds,” Cindy O’Donnell-Allen discusses the idea that “the key to lasting changes in mind is sustained participation in professional development spaces where colleagues support one another as they *mindfully* recycle practices and ideas along the full continuum (O’Donnell-Allen, 2005, p. 59).” The SEDL PLC provides such a professional development space, with consistent administrative and collegial support. In this environment, participants were able to take the new ideas they learned and use them as raw materials to be re-imagined and re-created in a new context.

“Giving teachers flexibility, giving them a range of skills, giving them different ways that it can look, and allowing them to take their own personality and match that to what they want in their classroom has been the best way to get authentic, true practice.” *Natalie Walchuk, Principal, Glenview Elementary, Oakland, CA* (Edutopia, 2013).

“As we become increasingly mindful, we can begin to respond from a place of freedom and choice. In other words we can act with resilience.” (Klau, L.,

n.d.). By fostering mindfulness practices that promote resilience in teachers and students, such as controlled deep breathing, intention setting and yoga, social-emotional core competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills and responsible decision-making (“Social and Emotional Core Learning Competencies.” n.d) are all deepened. Not unlike the new instructional shifts required by the introduction of the Common Core Learning Standards for Mathematics, which challenge teachers not only to teach algorithms and computational skills, but to understand foundational concepts that allow for deep mathematical comprehension, we need educators who understand Social Emotional Learning deeply and fluidly, if we want students to fully develop the social-emotional core competencies they will need to be college, career and life ready.

There are a considerable number of effective researched-based SEL programs available. Many can be found in the CASEL guidebook or in the New York State Board of Regent’s guidelines for social and emotional development. Encouraging and empowering teachers and School-Related Professionals to take an active role in social and emotional learning by supporting educators’ social-emotional development and providing multiple opportunities for them to lead is critical to making it work for your school.

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